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9. REPRESENTATION, AUTHENTICITY AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IN ARTS EDUCATION INQUIRY

Transubstantiating Research

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary and emergent forms of research in Arts Education seeks to uncover knowledge through *exploring, analysing and sharing authentic observed* experience. This focus has a particular salience where lived experience and reflections on it are primary ways that we learn when learning is based in the soma-aesthetic field; and it is this form of life-affirming knowing that can only ever be based on experience. Key to this is how individual's lives are shaped by intra- and inter-subjective factors, and the way these can be reflective of larger social and public themes.

The ongoing search for authenticity and representation poses a number of challenges. For example, broadly speaking research reported is an analogue of experience in that the experience is represented through other (re)presentational forms of experience; well-accepted forms or assemblages being transcripts of interviews take the place of the actual interview and researcher observation journals that provide rich description of the actual. However, in order for the research documentation and reporting to be valuable, it needs to be accessible, have verisimilitude, and at its best provide an evocation for the reader – a touchstone being a ring of ‘authenticity’ for the “reader”. Furthermore, researchers face the continuing challenge of using effective forms of representation of experience with authenticity, and the provocative question of ‘authenticity for whom?’. Therefore, researchers need not just to quest for research in authentic ways, but also to consider deeply the corresponding need to share research with an authenticity of voice, context and action, and the 'work' this might do.

In this chapter, we respond to the twin research challenges of authenticity and representation through wondering if the graphic novel form could be useful? Graphic novels are extended stories told in comic book form, the comic book genre being well established in popular culture as an engaging and accessible form capable of making research available to an increasingly diverse and important audience that we seek to engage.

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

The contested term *Graphic Novel* is a catchall for narratives that distinctively tell extended stories through combining visual images – which often imply movement – and written words – selective and intense – focused on action and dialogue (Madden, Bane, & Flory, 2006; Schelly, 2010). The images are stylised, simplified for maximum impact and give enhanced depiction of reality; the dialogue and text is similarly minimal, abbreviated and active. The Graphic Novel, a label said to be coined by Eisner (Arnold, November 14, 2003; Eisner, 1985), is an extension of the tradition of popular newspapers in the 1890s that told simple visual stories, almost exclusively humorous, designed for a society that was transitioning towards wider literacy. These uncomplicated three or four panel stories developed during the mid 20th Century to tell more complex narratives and often responded to the zeitgeist themes of the Depression, World War II and Post-War international uncertainty through superheroes defeating villains in this way replicating the ‘hero’s journey’ (Campbell, 1990). In the context of the rise of popular culture, increasing availability of mass communication, and extending availability of basic education, comics (along with film and television) challenged more traditional forms of narrative such as the novel. The term Graphic Novel is itself, contested but widely accepted (see, for example, discussion by Murray, 2016).

Whatever the merits of the term *Graphic Novel*, it is useful in the context of this exploration because the format has specific features that are functional for the purposes of capturing and sharing research. The Graphic Novel builds on the features of other forms of story such as sequencing of action, exploration of character and interactions of relationships within settings of place and historical time, structure and rising tension – structures that we, as drama educators, know well. Narrative presents a form of reality for a reader, “the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” Watt (1957, p. 32). The Graphic Novel format stretches further to provide narrative through powerful juxtapositioning of image and text. The visual fragmentation of story into panels allows for rapid but distinctive connections of action, character and interactions; processes we employ for pedagogical purposes.

Within the nested system of panels, the stylised images and graphic effects interact with dialogue speech bubbles, thought balloons and occasional contextual detail. The abbreviated and selective forms of text accelerate the storytelling in a form that is familiar and accessible. The frames of the panels allow for manipulating point of view, perspective and focus through the use of angles, close-ups, medium detail and landscape imagery. The use of light, shade, tone, colour and contrast contribute to creating the specific imagery of the comic form. But this is different from film, which has a parallel 20th Century history with the comic, and also has a strong reliance on visual and aural imagery. Film, we assert, controls the narrative in a one-way direction that the Graphic Novel format does not, thereby offering the possibility of a plurality of meanings where experience cannot be reducible to a single entity.